3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

must confess that the three or four favourite Chinese *plats* leave me cold. Shark's fin consists of a tangle of absolutely tasteless pieces of white elastic, stewed with shreds of chicken; sea-slugs are dark grey gelatinous substances with an unpleasant dead sort of flavour, swimming in a salty gravy; bamboo-root in slices has a nutty flavour and is not so bad, but very indigestible; another delicacy which is, I believe, a kind of seaweed tastes of—well, of seaweed. I can quite believe that all these things have a quite different flavour when fresh, especially the marine products which seem to appeal particularly to the Chinese; the trouble is that in Sinkiang, five months' journey from the coast, they can only be obtained in the dried form, and yet the Chinese like or pretend to like them better than the best-cooked fresh local products. The fact is, I suppose, that the exiled Chinaman has the palate of faith and to him even a dried sea-slug tastes of home.

What was almost always a trial at Yamen banquets was the drink. Except on great occasions when one or two bottles of a sticky brand of French champagne were produced and administered in small quantities, there was nothing to drink but a peculiarly evil-smelling kind of brandy. One was seldom pressed to eat, for which one was thankful enough, but it was impossible to avoid at least sipping the brandy between every course. A Chinese host talks much more about his cellar than about his cook; to refuse to drink with him means that you do not like his wine, an imputation which causes him much loss of face. Apart from the conventional politenesses, which one soon learns to give and take as a matter of course, there is nothing stilted or ceremonious about Chinese conviviality, even on official occasions. The etiquette seems to be for a guest to behave as if he were in his own home, lolling about on his chair, getting up from table in the middle of dinner and walking about for a few minutes, and so on. When conversation flagged at our own parties it was generally safe to start the Chinese off on a kind of "fingers-out" game which was very popular. In this, two players put out their right hands at the same time, either closed or with one or more fingers outstretched, at the same time shouting a number which they guess will be the total number of fingers out for both hands. Whenever one of the players shouts the correct number, he makes the other drink his health. The fingers go out and the numbers are shouted with amazing rapidity, and when three or four such contests are going on at the same time

3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

574 [524]

the effect on the gaiety, or at any rate noisiness, of the party and on the circulation of the liquor is remarkable.

The manners and customs of the table-servants were a never-failing source of delight to D. and myself. I have mentioned in a former chapter the staid Chinese butler at Yangi Hissar who clapped his master's bowler on top of his own Homburg and stood solemnly wearing the two hats throughout the tea-party. Often at dinner-parties in the open, when we had left the table and were sitting over tea and dessert in another part of the garden, I noticed the waiters going round the table and pouring back into the bottle any champagne or brandy left by the diners in their glasses. After one of our own dinners on the terrace, I happened to go back suddenly to the table to fetch something and found two attendants who had come with Chinese guests similarly occupied—but it was not into my bottles that they were pouring the remains of the drinks. At a certain ladies' dinner-party at Khotan D. was electrified to observe one of the waiters take away a guests' cup, drink off the cold remains of the tea and, without washing it, fill it up from the tea-pot and hand it back to its owner. After that, she said, she took care to drain her cup to the dregs every time!

Harding and I (D. fortunately was not invited) attended during our first week in Kashgar another meal which was very different from the civilized banquet described above. This was a lunch given by General Ma, Titai (G.O.C.) of Kashgaria, one of the worst scoundrels in Central Asia. This person was a 661 Muhammadan of Yunnan province, aged over seventy yet full of vitality, who had held the chief military command south of the Tien Shan for seven or eight years and had taken advantage of his position to enrich and aggrandize himself by the most brutal and oppressive methods. He made everybody call him *Padshah* (king) on pain of death; he had a whole harem full of the prettiest Turki women in Kashgar, and his armed agents roamed the country-side "looking for new cows to milk," as the Titai facetiously put it. The only person in Kashgaria of whom he was afraid was Chu Tao Tai, and after the latter's transfer his extortions quadrupled. He had a pleasant way of trumping up charges against people whom he did not like, or who refused to pay him the blackmail he demanded, and cutting off their fingers or toes, joint by joint, in an immense hay-chopper he had constructed specially for the purpose. In fact, he emulated the exploits of the worst robber-Tuchuns of China Proper, the only difference being